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Rise of the SCO

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Formed in 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) presently accounts for 60% of the landmass of Eurasia and a quarter of the world's population. Including observer states, which are potential members, its affiliates represent half of the humanity. The SCO was formed as a mutual-security organization by Russia, China and four Central Asian states (except Turkmenistan) with an aim to promote peace, security and stability in the region. It has been mainly centered on its members' Central Asia related security concerns of terrorism, separatism, extremism and drug trafficking. Operating within that limited framework, the SCO has modest achievements to its credit. So far, the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) has been its most successful component. Central Asia has been a part of the 'Great Game' of nations ever since the fall of the Soviet Union. USA, the undisputed superpower hitherto, has tried to expand its sphere of influence in this region by filling the vacuum created by Soviet Russia.

Now that the US itself is trapped in a hapless war in Afghanistan and is trying to find out a face-saving exit strategy, owing to the lack of economic resources at its end to sustain a huge military expenditure there, the role of the SCO in post-exit scenario is bound to become more assertive. Moreover, these rising regional powers comprising the SCO have enough cash in their coffers to contribute to the stability and development of the region. Further, there is a strategic convergence among the regional players on the issue of peace and stability in the region since doing so will not only integrate Central Asia with South Asia, at the same time it would mean good for the development of half of the mankind, which resides in this region.

Apart from that, relative increase in the significance of the SCO vis-à-vis the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) can be attributed to other geopolitical factors as well. Major among them is the of late improvement in Russia-EU ties. It is well-known that Europe is largely dependent on Russian gas. Russia-Ukraine gas dispute two years ago exposed the

vulnerability of Europe to any such interruption in supply of gas. Moreover, Moscow's cooperation with the two major European powers- France and Germany has strengthened in other spheres as well. While Germany and Russia are jointly developing the Nord Stream Gas pipeline which would deliver natural gas from Russia to Germany; Kremlin is in the process of acquiring Mistral class amphibious assault ships from France for the Russian Navy. It is the first major arms deal between Russia and Europe since the Second World War. Germany and France have also been opposed to the idea of eastward expansion of the NATO. It was due to their stance that the plans for extending NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia were put off. Individual national interests of countries like France, Germany and Poland have already started casting shadow over coordination within the NATO. The US is opposed to the Mistral deal. Also, there seems no consensus building up on Washington's plans to establish Anti-Missile Defence in Eastern Europe and setup military bases in the former Soviet states.

While Russia has energy leverage, China, on the other hand, is an economic superpower to reckon with. With Europe reeling under the biggest ever financial crunch and Eurozone on the verge of collapse, China has extended a 'helping hand' and indicated that it is going to buy European bonds which will help Euro economies stay afloat. On visit to Europe recently, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said, "China has actually increased the purchase of government bonds of some European countries, and we haven't cut back on our Euro holdings." "In the future, as we have done in the past, we will support Europe and the Euro," Wen added. Thanks to this economic might of China, nowadays European leaders can be seen eulogizing China, rather than crying foul over its 'Human Rights' record.

The message is clear. With the rise of Asia, the world has become more integrated and inter-dependent. Europe needs both China as well as Russia. Europe's role in the NATO will be determined by the individual relations of its member countries with the outside world. Even within the NATO, the problem of coordination is apparent. Many NATO members were opposed to military action in Libya, which was aggressively advocated by America, Britain and France. Most of the NATO members are still in favour of a political settlement in Libya. Germany, a major NATO player, even abstained from voting in the UNSC on establishing "no-fly zone" over Libya.

While the power of the NATO is apparently waning, the SCO on the other hand, is becoming stronger by the day with its member states developing economically and technically, at a tremendous pace. The SCO has provided the Asian powers an opportunity to work towards establishing a multi-polar world by taking in their hands, the peace process in the region. The future of the SCO will depend on the members' inter se ties and cooperation in other spheres as well. Going by their impressive show of their camaraderie on such platforms as BRICS, BASIC etc., the rise of the SCO seems imminent.